

# HIDDEN AFRICANS OF THE BIBLE AND EARLY CHURCH

Catherine Clark Kroeger

*How seldom are we made aware of the special promises that God has given to African people! Psalm 68:31 declares that “Cush shall reach out its arms to God!” (The early Church loved this promise, for they considered Cush to be a metaphor for the gentile Bride of Christ.) The Psalms predicted that one day people would recognize the spirituality of the Cushites, and declare that they had been born anew in Zion (87:3-6). Isaiah foretold that God would bring forth a remnant from Cush (11:11), and a redeemed people bearing gifts to Zion (18:1-8). Zephaniah proclaimed that from beyond the rivers of Cush, God’s people should bring offerings (3:10). Amos expresses God’s concern for Cush: “Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?” says the Lord” (9:7).*

**B**iblical scholars are aware that “Cush” sometimes refers to all of Africa, sometimes to all of Africa except Egypt, and sometimes to ancient Nubia, stretching from modern Aswan in the north to Khartoum in the south. Today most of this area lies in the Sudan. But how is the general reader to understand that Cush and Cushite (used 57 times in the Hebrew Bible) are in fact a designation for an African nation and people? Some versions of the Bible translate “Cush” as “Ethiopia,” but this does not ordinarily designate the modern country of that name. David Adamo has suggested that the best translation is simply “Africa.”

All of us have a right to know and applaud the important biblical role played by Africans. People of African descent may claim the deep roots of their ancestors in the Bible.

## AFRICA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We read in Genesis that one of the rivers of Eden ran around the whole land of Cush, and another encircled the land of Havilah that yielded gold and onyx and bdellium (2:10-13). These products were found in antiquity principally in the area now known as the Sudan. If the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are located in Babylonia, then there is good reason to believe some of Eden lay in Africa. We are now told that the oldest human remains may also be traced to Africa.

Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, may well have derived her ancestry from south of Egypt, and she alone of all the Bible characters gives God a name (Gen 16:13). Like Abraham, she meets God in the form of an angel and is given a promise that her progeny shall become a great nation (Gen 21:18).

Moses’ Cushite wife aroused the bitter jealousy of his sister Miriam. (Num 12:11-16). Amusingly, Miriam, who resents her black sister-in-law, becomes white with leprosy until she mends her ways. If this Cushite wife was Zipporah, then the Moses’ father-in-law is Jethro the priest, who instituted the judicial, administrative and sacrificial patterns of Israel (Ex 18:1-27). He and his family had received the exiled Moses during Moses’ forty years as a shepherd in Sinai.

Zipporah had understood the importance of circumcision and performed the ritual on their sons (Ex 18:1-27). Even if the Cushite wife refers to a second spouse, then Moses also looks to his new father-in-law for guidance and direction (Num 10:29-32; Jdg 1:16).

When the Israelites settle the land of Canaan, there were Africans among them. Some may have left Egypt along with the Israelites at the time of the Exodus; others came with military invaders (1 Kg 14:25-28; 2 Chr 12:2-3; 14:9-15; cf. 16:8). Apparently an Ethiopian colony was created at Gerar as a buffer between Egypt and Judah. Thus, the Ethiopians became permanent residents in Palestine, remaining there until time of Hezekiah (715-685 BCE).

Accordingly we read, “They journeyed to the entrance of Gedor, to the east side of the valley, to seek pasture for their flocks, where they found rich, good pasture, and the land was very broad, quiet, and peaceful; for the former inhabitants there belonged to Ham” (1 Chr 4:39-40). Further, a group of Philistines and Arabs were said to be settled “near the Ethiopians” (2 Chr 21:16).

Persons of African descent appear to have taken an active role in Israel’s social and political life. The bride in Song of Solomon is “black and beautiful” (Song 1:5). A Cushite who possessed tact, discretion, and a high position in the royal court appeared as a trusted courtier sent to tell David news of Absalom’s death (2 Sam 18:19-32).

Africans continued to enjoy royal favor, as Solomon married an Egyptian princess (1 Kg 9:16, 24; 2 Chr 8:11) and received the Queen of Sheba (1 Kg 10:1-13; 2 Chr 9:1-2). This influential queen ruled dark-skinned peoples on both sides of the Red Sea, and she may well have initially come to Solomon to negotiate a trade treaty with his growing maritime power. Though she tested him with hard questions, in the end she told him all that was in her heart. It appears that in this black woman Solomon found a kindred spirit with whom he could discourse freely.

Whether or not that relationship was sexual, there is evidence that other alliances did indeed produce children. Zephaniah, a descendant of Hezekiah, is called the son of Cush and brings special prophecies about Cush (Zeph 1:1; 3:10). Jehudi, the courtier sent to bear Jeremiah’s message

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from Baruch to King Zedekiah, appears to have had a Cushite ancestor (Jer 36:14). Faithfully, Baruch stands before the king, reading the words of God, while the king slashes the scroll and casts it in the fire (Jer 36: 21, 23).

Ebed-Melek, a confidential advisor of the king, is identified as a Cushite four times (Jer 38:7, 10, 12; 39:16). Believing that Jeremiah was bringing God's authentic voice to Judah, Ebed-Melek risked his life to rescue the prophet from the cistern and secure for him a hearing with the king. Jeremiah commends the courtier's faith (39:15-18) and proclaims to him a special covenant of God's protection.

When Cushite pharaohs ruled over Egypt, they contracted military alliances with both Israel and Judah, especially during the time of the Twenty-fifth or Cushite Dynasty. Sabacho (716-701 BC, called So in 2 Kings 17:4) contracted an alliance against Assyria with Hoshea, king of Israel, while Tirhakah (690-664) came to the aid of Hezekiah when Jerusalem was besieged (2 Kg 19:9; Is 37:9). Mortuary figurines of Tirhakah clearly reveal his African features, and his enormous statue still towers above the great temple complex at Karnak.

## AFRICA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The kingdom of Cush continues to play a role in the New Testament, where we read of the conversion of Candace's Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:26-39). Candace was the royal title of the Queen Mother of Nubia, a powerful African nation located principally in what is now Sudan. Greek was spoken in the court, so the chamberlain would have had no problem reading a Septuagint version of the prophet Isaiah; and Philip, a Greek-speaking Jew, would easily have communicated the Gospel to him.

It was Candace who wielded the real political and military power from her capitol city in Meroe while her son served as a religious figurehead. The royal mother made gifts to deities on behalf of the kingdom and may have sent her chamberlain with a gift to Jerusalem. The arts of civilization flourished at a high level throughout her realm, and twice her forces engaged the Roman army in battle.

Further to the north lay Cyrene, capital city of the Roman province Cyrenaica. The city was famous for three schools of philosophy and for native sons who excelled in medicine, mathematics, rhetoric and literature. Perhaps the most illustrious of these was the astronomer Eratosthenes, who in approximately 200 BC computed the circumference of the earth with remarkable accuracy. No less brilliant was the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, who became the director of the library at Alexandria and acquired an astonishing reputation for the versatility of his aptitudes. Athletes from Cyrene excelled in Olympic competition, especially in horse chariot racing.

Ships carried corn, oil and wool from the fertile fields of Cyrene, as well as a contraceptive known as sylphium, much

sought after in Rome. Cyrene maintained a monopoly on the herb until it became extinct through overharvesting approximately AD 200.

The citizens of Cyrene roamed far and wide throughout the Mediterranean world as merchants, athletes, philosophers, orators, mercenaries and entertainers. The Jewish community of the city had a deep interest in Judaism and produced an important literature including a five-book history of the Maccabees by Jason the Cyrenian (2 Maccabees 2:43). There were close ties with Jerusalem. Simon of Cyrene may have been impressed to carry the cross of Jesus when he came as a devout Jew to pay a Passover visit to Jerusalem. Apparently he became a believer, and his sons were known to the Christian community (Mk 15:21; cf. Rom 16:13).

Although an African synagogue, that of the Cyreneans and Alexandrians, first objected to the preaching of Stephen (Acts 6:9), other natives of Cyrene became early adherents of Christianity and carried the good news to Cyprus (Acts 11:19-26). From there Cyrenians and Cyprians travelled on to Antioch and innovated a Gospel approach to non-Jewish Greeks. This revolutionary action drew the attention of the Jerusalem Council, and Barnabas was dispatched to assess this new development. Convinced of the authenticity of the mission, Barnabas strategized with the leaders and went to Tarsus to seek out Paul. Implementation of the Africans' dream would require the involvement of a multinational and multicultural task force. As the church at Antioch prayed, searched the Scriptures and strategized for a full year, a core of leaders developed. Of the five who are named, two are African: Lucius of Cyrene, and Simon called the Black (Acts 13:1-2). Here again, translations fail to inform us that "Niger" is Latin for "Black." This may well be none other than Simon of Cyrene.

The missionary agency was in large part initiated, strategized, promoted and directed by Africans. The story of Acts tells us that Paul and Barnabas were promptly sent to Cyprus, home of some members of the Antiochene community (Acts 13:4-12), but archaeological evidence tells us of the arrival of the Gospel in Cyrene. By the end of the first century AD, there were Christian burials inside the Jewish cemetery at Cyrene.

## AFRICANS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was a Christian philosopher with a keen desire to win pagan intellectuals to Christ. He directed a catechetical school at Alexandria and wrote important exhortations to the heathen as well as to Christians, calling them to a more perfect life in Christ. Another African, Origen (185-254), became the director of a catechetical school at age 18. His was the finest mind the church would produce in 300 years. Origen was highly successful in debating Jews, pagans, and Gnostics, and is in fact credited with destroying Gnosticism. This important

biblical scholar, theologian, exegete, and pioneer in biblical criticism produced the Hexapla, comparing six versions of the Bible. He profoundly influenced the theological thought of the succeeding centuries.

Tertullian (160-225) was a pagan lawyer who converted to Christianity. He authored apologetic, theological, and controversial works, and was the first theologian to write in Latin. It was he who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, and coined nearly a thousand new words to explain Christian truths.

Athanasius (296-373), was Bishop of Alexandria and a major theologian and writer. He was the chief upholder of the doctrine that Christ was both man and God, and was the principle opponent of the Arian doctrine that Jesus was man rather than God. Even as a very young deacon, he was influential at the Council of Nicea. Opponents referred to him as the "black dwarf." He was repeatedly exiled and persecuted, but his principles ultimately prevailed at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Cyril, who died in 444, was also Bishop of Alexandria. He brilliantly represented and systematized the teachings of Athanasius and other Alexandrians. He was a vigorous opponent of heresy.

Perpetua and Felicitas were two martyrs who died in the Carthage arena in 202. Their story was widely used in winning others to Christ.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, died a martyr in 258. He possessed a profound knowledge of Scriptures, wrote important theological works, fought heresy, and insisted on the unity of the Church.

Lactantius (c. AD 317) is best known for his *Institutes*, described as the "most comprehensive apology which Christianity created before the end of the time of persecution." The major theme of the *Institutes* is justice. Lactantius insisted that God had given humanity a way of life open to all people regardless of race, education, sex, color or creed.

St. Maurice of Aganum (born about 287) was a Roman general who refused to kill Christians during the slave revolt in Gaul. He declared to the emperor Maximian:

We cannot obey you without denying God, the Creator of all things, our Master as well as yours, whether you acknowledge it or not.

He was slaughtered by imperial decree along with his regiment for his defense of slaves.

G. Marius Victorinus (280-363) was a neoplatonist professor of rhetoric with a brilliant record as philosopher and scholar. Educated in Africa but taught in Rome, he wrote theological and devotional works that were to lead to the conversion of Augustine.

Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo, was one of the Doctors of the Church. A profoundly influential theologian, he dealt with three heresies: Manichaeism, Donatism, and Pelagianism. Augustine had remarkable insights into the

human heart and soul. His most famous work is *Confessions*, written to describe his conversion and win others to Christ by detailing the philosophical basis for Christianity. Monica (331-387) was Augustine's prayerful and powerful mother.

Zeno of Verona served as bishop of Verona from 362 to 375. Over one hundred of his tractates survive as well as a collection of sermons.

Optatus of Melevis served as a Bishop in North Africa. He worked to reconcile Christians during the Donatist Schism, and was influential in the East and West as well as in Africa. He died before 400 AD.

By 480 Victor of Vita served as Bishop in the province of Byzacena. He described the survival of the Church during an invasion of vandals. He perceived that the persecution was not only religious but also political.

Bishop Vigilius of Thapsus participated in a religious synod between the Arians and the Orthodox in 484. He produced important theological and ecclesiastical works.

Fulgentius of Ruspe (467-533) was a Roman civil servant who resigned his post to enter the priesthood. In 507 he was elected bishop of Ruspe. Later driven out of Africa by the Vandals, he was instrumental in popularizing Augustine's work.

Three early popes were African. Pope Victor I (AD 189-199) popularized Latin as the common language of the church, thereby making Christianity more democratic and accessible to ordinary people. Pope Melchades (311-314, sometimes known as Meltiades) was persecuted prior to his reign as pope. He was considered one of the African Christian martyrs. Pope Gelasius I (A.D. 492-496) worked to settle conflicts in church and believed that "both civil and sacred powers are of divine origin, and independent, each in its own sphere."

Let us thank God for the important role played by Africans in the Bible and early Church. Let us share the Good News that Christ died to redeem people of all races and nationalities. Let us proclaim that God's love knows no boundaries. And let us affirm the amazing diversity of God's creation!

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